

Andorra

A Medieval Survival: Freemen of the Pyrenees

By Edward Wright

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THE tiny Pyrenean Republic, with its old-world title of "The Valleys and Sovereignty of Andorra," is the last quaint, romantic fragment of life in Western Europe in the feudal age. It is a tiny square of mountain land, extending about 17½ miles north to south, and east to west. So small are the ribbons of fertile land amid the gigantic masses of rock that the population never rises above 6,000 without danger of famine. To their poverty the mountaineers owe their strange freedom as much as to the skilful way their forefathers balanced themselves between the contending interests of France and Spain.

Andorra was one of the mountain refuges in the age of Saracen conquest, and the mountaineers, by ancient tradition, held their power through Charlemagne and his agent, the Bishop of Urgel, the neighbouring town in Catalonia. The fighting bishop was over-ridden by one of the scores of knights, busy carving out domains for themselves instead of pursuing the retreating Moors.

The Gate of Invasion to Spain

In 1170 the Count of Urgel ceded the mountain patch to the Count of Casteibo. Then the powerful French Count of Foix won by love what his fathers had vainly tried to win by war, and his marriage with the heiress of Castelbo gave him the Andorran gate of invasion to the Ebro valley.

This did not suit with Spanish interests. Another militant Bishop of Urgel, with the growing power of Aragon behind him, revived his claim through Charlemagne.

The learning with which the claim was supported was merely a greased path down which the Frenchman might gracefully slide out of Spain. Scores of thousands of Spanish blades were behind the pen of the erudite priest.

Foix reckoned that so meagre a domain as Andorra, with its insurgent Catalans trained to ambush warfare, was not worth fighting for.

By a feudal Act of Division, signed in 1278, the Count of Foix accepted an annual tribute worth 960 francs in modern currency; the Bishop of Urgel received 460 francs yearly; both were given a right to send a provost to Andorra, and the mountaineers were left free to govern themselves.

Balance of Power in Miniature

Their land remained the dead centre of all the strong antagonistic play of forces between Spain and France for some 650 years. When Spanish despotism threatened, the Andorrans leant towards France; when France became a menace, they inclined towards Spain. Happily for them, the great rock rampart of the Pyrenees affords much easier ways of travel for armies of conquest near its sea ends. This, no doubt, is the reason why the mountaineers liked to leave both their passes and valleys roadless, and maintain only the prehistoric mule tracks. The less their ways of communication were developed, the less was the danger of attack by the great opposing Powers.

There are, however, modern expressions of power against which mountains, fog clouds, and snowdrifts are no protection. In 1904 France and Spain agreed to drive a railway through the Pyrenees near Andorra, and for some years the little poverty-stricken State has had to resist the seductions of financiers eager to make the Republic, with its splendid scenery, tonic air, and Southern warmth, a great centre of fashionable gambling like Monte Carlo.

Virtue reigns at present in the stern little country. A child born out of wedlock must be carried in



THE ILLUSTRIOUS MEN OF ANDORRA WITH THEIR PROCURATOR-GENERAL AND THEIR HOLY SUZERAIN

In the centre stands the Lord Bishop of Urgel, in Spain, whose ancient predecessor saved Andorra from vassalage to France, for which he is rewarded with 460 francs a year. On his right is the Procurator-General, the lifelong head of the little commonwealth. The other men, in state robes of cocked hats and cloaks, are some of the twenty-four "Illustrious Men," or Members of Parliament

ANDORRA, A MEDIEVAL SURVIVAL

darkness from hamlet to hamlet and left beyond the frontier. On the other hand, practically every man at some time in his life is a smuggler. In Old Andorra, the capital of the commonwealth, with a population of 600, two of the most important buildings are a tobacco factory and a wax match factory, that live entirely by contraband trade with France and Spain.

Smuggling, The National Industry

There is usually a band of highly respectable Andorrans in French prisons, and another band in Spanish prisons. French and Spanish custom house men maintain a perpetual blockade of the difficult frontier. Yet every favourable night the smugglers are at work, each carrying about half a hundred-weight of goods. As a profit of 350 to 400 per cent. is made, in addition to factory and growers' costs, smuggling is the best paying national industry. It pays far better than the open traffic in wool and hides that goes in summer to France and in winter to Spain.

The people live in two valleys—the Valley of the North and the Valley of the East—that wind about the central peak of Casamanya, with the torrent-breached walls of the outer mountain masses closing every distant prospect, except the southern view towards the Spanish frontier. From the high windy saddle of Puigmorens, by which travellers from France often enter the Republic, the Emballira, or Valira, stream runs down the eastern valley, dropping thousands of feet from hamlet to hamlet, through a tangle of heights bright with snow or sombre with pine woods.

Proud Consuls of the Republic

In every hamlet of dark, primitive, dirty houses, with timber balconies, life goes on as in the Middle Ages, with old-fashioned crafts handed on from father to son, ministering to the simple needs of the villagers. In each of the six communes, two eldermen, with the proud title of "Consuls," arrange, with the aid of a council of heads of families, the division of

pastures and the rights of collecting wood on the forest-clad hills.

About a couple of generations ago the ordering of things was in the hands of the oldest families, who maintained their power by the custom of primogeniture. There was, however, a successful democratic change in 1866, and all heads of households in the valleys now vote in the elections.

In the south, where the two valleys join, and the vast mountain of Anclara threatens to bury Old Andorra, the capital, with avalanches of broken rock, there is a plain, farmhouse kind of building, topped by a watch-tower and belfry. This is the Parliament House of the Republic, the only building of interest in the primitive country.

The Council of the Illustrious Men

The ground floor is a stable for the ponies and mules of the Illustrious Men and the Chief Magistrate. By a poor wooden stairway the first floor is reached. Here is a school-room, with sixteenth-century frescoes, the refectory of the Council of State, and the Council Chamber. Into the wall is built a safe with six locks, opened by keys held separately by each of the six communes, so that, unless all agree, the strong-box cannot be opened. Within are kept the archives.

The heads of families in each parish elect four Illustrious Men, and they, as need arises, choose a president for life, known as the Syndic and Procurator-General. He presides over the twenty-four Illustrious Councillors-General five times a year, or when any citizen cares to summon a general council by paying the expenses of £3. In the same building there is a dormitory for the Councillors and Syndic, and a kitchen, with a huge chimney under which an ox can be roasted whole over a charcoal fire, provides them with food in medieval fashion.

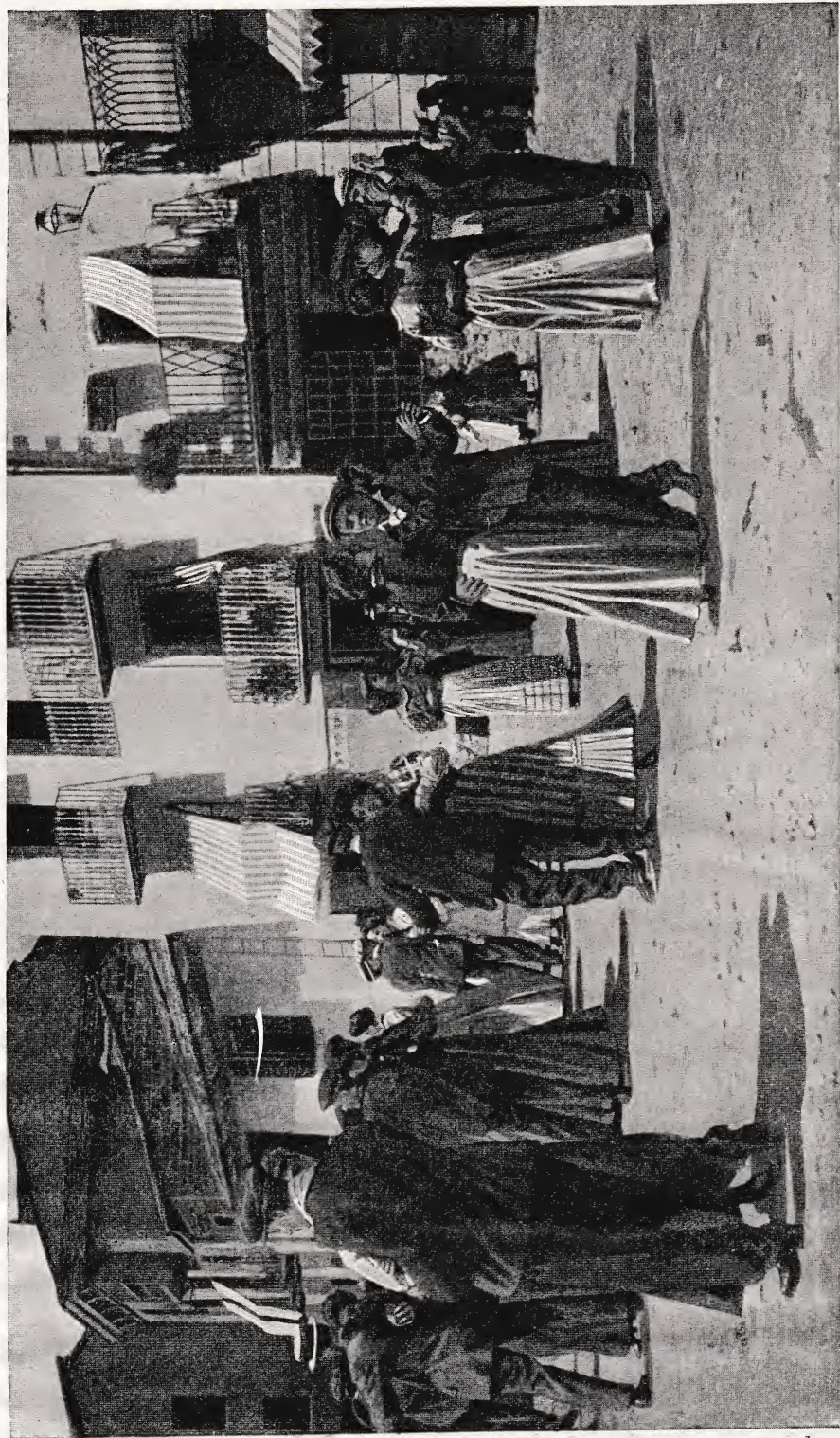
Such is the House of the Valley, in which the homely fathers of the homeliest of commonwealths still come to great decisions. Up to the present, for instance, they have



SAN JULIAN, AN IMPORTANT TOWN IN THE MINIATURE REPUBLIC, WOULD BE A VILLAGE ELSEWHERE

This is San Julian, the grand tobacco depot, and also the headquarters of the bands of smugglers who provide the Spanish people with cheap, good smoking mixture and matches. San Julian supports a population of 700, of whom quite one hundred are men. As in winter the way into Spain is not blocked by snow, they have little need, unlike the French smuggling band, to emigrate until the spring to find work

Photo, Canon I. T. Parker



NEW FASHIONS IN FESTIVAL DANCING AMONG YOUNG FOLK IN OLD-FASHIONED ANDORRA

In the country dances that follow after church service on feast days in Andorra, the great dance used to be the ancient, slow, and solemn "jota," but the young men have returned from years of munition-work in Barcelona and Southern France, and brought back new dances. Even the old-fashioned beret is yielding to English straw hat and cloth cap. Yet some say Andorra never changes

Photo, Canon J. T. Parfitt



MOUNTED SMUGGLER-FIGHTERS AT THE CUSTOM-HOUSE END OF THE ANDORRAN VALLEY

Mounted guards, like these, patrol all the frontier paths, especially in daylight, when no respectable, practised Andorran would be seen carrying contraband. Rumour has it that some guards sleep very soundly at night, and like riding too well to explore secret mountain ways on foot. In this case they earn more than their pay, and untaxed tobacco and matches grow cheap beyond the frontier



AMATEUR SMUGGLER WHO MET WITH MISFORTUNE

This Pyrenean tramp was carrying tobacco, and hoping, by simple audacity, to pass the custom-house. But his nerve failed him when mounted guards came in view. Throwing his load away, he begged for the job of porter from the traveller seen behind him, so as to escape suspicion

Photo, Canon J. T. Parfit

rejected the offer to make their country rich and lift their folk out of grinding poverty by means of palatial hotels, because they have religious scruples against the gaming-tables upon which this prosperity would be based.

Although the free mountaineers work hard and long, their strips of fertile valley land do not support them. Every winter a considerable number of men migrate in search of work to Barcelona and French centres of industry along the Gulf of Lyons.

Of game there is a super-abundance, and trout are so plentiful that the visitor at times longs for a change from them. In the lovely summer

evenings there is dancing, to the music of flutes and hautboys, in all the plazas. Taxation is light, and although some food has to be imported, there are no customs dues.

The Andorrans maintain a tiny army of 600 men, over whom some shadow of feudal control is exercised by provosts appointed by the French President, representing the ancient Count of Foix, and by the Prince Bishop of Urgel. Traditional home service the mountaineers like, but the fear of being absorbed in the armies of the two great neighbouring Powers keeps their spirit of independence always alive and very keen.



ANNAMESE ACTORS IN A FESTIVAL PANTOMIME PLAYED IN THE TROPIC NIGHT IN A TORCH-LIT GARDEN

It is on the feast of Têt that such bands as this perform in pagodas or in the open air. In this case the mimes came, with a considerable audience, to the garden of the authoress, and some of the native spectators held torches upon which paraffin was continually spurted to brighten the scene. To the sound of tom-toms and clarionets was given a whirling, wordless play, ending with a struggle with a tiger man

Photo. Miss Vincent